

NEWS RELEASE

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Ministry of Forests and Range
BC Public Service Agency

B.C. FOREST FIRE FIGHTERS TO RECEIVE BENEFITS

VICTORIA – Seasonal forest fire fighters working for the BC Public Service will now be eligible to receive full medical and extended health benefits in recognition of their unique role and job requirements.

“While they are seasonal employees, providing B.C.’s wildfire fighters with access to benefits coverage just makes sense when you consider the dangers and unique physical demands of the work they do to protect our communities,” said Ida Chong, minister responsible for the BC Public Service Agency. “This change is one more demonstration of the innovative approaches we’re taking to ensure the BC Public Service can recruit and retain the qualified people needed to serve the people of B.C.”

“The men and women protecting our forests are some of the most dedicated and committed members of the BC Public Service,” said Forests and Range Minister Rich Coleman. “Unlike any other seasonal employees, wildfire fighters need to pass a rigorous fitness test to be rehired each year and then their jobs place them at serious risk of physical harm. If they are willing to take on that risk season after season, it’s only right that we support that commitment with health and other benefits.”

Wildfire fighters are hired as auxiliary employees of the BC Public Service due to the seasonal nature of their work. Under a new agreement with the B.C. Government Employees Union, seasonal wildfire fighters and other seasonal auxiliary employees of the Protection Branch who serve for three consecutive seasons with at least 700 hours worked in their most recent 26 pay periods will be eligible for benefits when they return for a fourth season. Those benefits include the same medical, extended health care, dental, group life insurance and employee and family assistance program coverage available to regular employees of the BC Public Service.

To be eligible for benefits, auxiliary employees normally must work 1,827 hours in 33 pay periods or work three consecutive years maintaining 1,200 hours within the previous 26 pay periods. Due to the relatively short length of their term of employment, wildfire fighters rarely work enough consecutive pay periods to meet these requirements even though many return to serve year after year.

“Our crews do this job because it is a challenging and rewarding way to contribute to our communities and our province,” said Brian Atherton, Forest Protection Officer with the Northwest Fire Protection Centre based in Telkwa. “Some staff have been fighting wildfires each summer for decades, and extending benefits to our auxiliary members is a greatly appreciated acknowledgement of our unique work.”

In October 2006, the BC Public Service released its first corporate Human Resources Plan, Being the Best, which set out an ambitious strategy to become a more competitive employer. The extension of benefits coverage to seasonal auxiliary firefighters is the latest in a series of innovative changes implemented under Being the Best over the past year.

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In the 2007 fire season, over 900 wildfire fighters worked to protect communities across the province, including assisting with flood mitigation efforts. In an average season, they face 2,000 fires and contain 92 per cent of them within 24 hours of discovery. B.C. is internationally recognized for its highly trained wildfire management personnel and expertise.

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